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**NEWS** with The Saginaw **NEWS**

## Great Lakes region realizes pilfering threat

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**BRYCE HOFFMAN**

The region braces to protect its most valuable resource as outsiders cast covetous eyes on Great Lakes water.

### THE SAGINAW NEWS

As the world's demand for reliable sources of freshwater increases, Michigan finds itself at ground zero for potential water wanters.

The Great Lakes basin contains 20 percent of the world's freshwater in five of the world's 15 largest lakes - all serving about 50 million people, less than 1 percent of the world's population.

Experts say pressure to sell, export and divert water from the Great Lakes will intensify in coming decades, especially if development continues unabated in arid climates such as Arizona, New Mexico and the Middle East.

"Unquestionably, there's a threat," said Michael J. Donahue, president and chief executive officer of the Great Lakes Commission, a nonpartisan Great Lakes advocacy group based in Ann Arbor.

"The idea that the Great Lakes could be a source of water for other areas of the world or even in the country is really ill advised. There is not too much water in the Great Lakes. There is no excess water to go around."

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The commission estimates that more than 989 billion gallons of water are withdrawn from the Great Lakes every day. About 54 billion gallons a day are never returned to the system, statistics show.

The Council of Great Lakes Governors - an organization of eight U.S. governors, including Michigan's Gov. John Engler, and the premiers of the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec - decides how and when to divert Great Lakes water.

Members of the council signed an agreement last month to encourage tighter scrutiny of water diversion projects, including small-scale proposals.

"Even a small-scale diversion or export could literally and figuratively open the flood gates," Donahue said. "Once you turn the tap on, it's very difficult to turn off. We can't afford any foot in the door. Even small-scale proposals could set some precedent that could hurt us down the road."

State Sen. Michael J. Goschka, a Brant Republican, said lawmakers at every level should "stand guard" against attempts to parcel out water from the Great Lakes.

"It is a resource that everybody wants, and as need becomes greater, want becomes greater as well," he said. "The day will probably come when there will be a genuine move on the part of congressmen and senators out in the West who will try to take our water."

Although control over Great Lakes water rests inside the region for now, Congress could try to seize control of the waterways and move the decision-making power to Washington, D.C., where Great Lakes lawmakers are vastly outnumbered, mid-Michigan congressmen say.

"It's a major issue," said U.S. Rep. Dave Camp, a Midland Republican. "I want to make sure that we protect our Great Lakes. I want to see the control of the Great Lakes remain at the state and local level."

U.S. Rep. James A. Barcia, a Bay City Democrat, said Congress should restrict its role to managing relations with Canada, an area where individual states have no legal jurisdiction, and guarding the

lakes from commercial exploitation.

"Our collective clout in the Midwest has diminished," he said. "If you turn the entire issue over to the federal government and to Congress, we could end up losing this battle and suffering the consequences."

The International Joint Commission, a binational agency that the United States and Canada established as part of the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty, spent a year examining water usage in the Great Lakes basin.

"Our bottom-line recommendation is that there should be no removal of water from the Great Lakes basin until there are standards in place to protect the Great Lakes ecosystem," said spokesman Frank Bevacqua.

"We didn't find any threats to Great Lakes water from exports or from long-range diversions for the foreseeable future, but there will continue to be growing demand for the Great Lakes to supplement drinking water supplies."

Donahue said conservation is the key to preserving freshwater resources.

"It's kind of like feeding an addiction," he said. "The more you get, the more you need - and you never have enough."

"Water shortages around the world and around the country are due to the fact that development is taking place in areas where it has no business taking place. Communities need to live within their means."

"We need to make sure that all use of Great Lakes water is sustainable, and that we don't do anything today that is going to compromise future generations." t

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